

Pastor's Message – 9/4/22  
Jeremiah 18:1-6  
Psalm 139

Evidence of our "mistrust" of one another is everywhere. A few years ago, a significant symbol of mistrust was erected in our nation's capital. Cement barriers were moved along Pennsylvania Avenue, where it ran in front of the White House. We had finally come to a point in our national history where our civilian population could no longer be trusted to drive by the president's place of residence.

If we don't trust the general population to be good citizens, neither do we any longer trust mothers and fathers to be caring, loving or even sensible parents.

We certainly don't trust any business or industry that is trying to make money.

How far does our mistrust go? Do we trust God to be in control of our lives? In control of our Church?

We heard a reading today from the Book of the prophet Jeremiah and the meaning of the verses we heard today hinges on the rich image of the potter as symbolic of God's creative activity in the world. A potter, or yotzer, is one who takes the most common, seemingly worthless element of the earth, the clay itself, and transforms it into something functional, valuable, even beautiful. The fashioning of pottery is one of the oldest achievements of human culture, and pottery is one of the first cultural materials used for artistic expression. The image of the potter, then, is one that communicates not only the physical task of crafting a ceramic vessel, but also the artistic skill and talent needed by one who would do so. Perhaps for this reason, the image of God the Creator portrayed as a potter is one of the oldest (Genesis 2:7-8, 19) and most enduring in ancient Israelite religion.

The potter puts everything they have into creating a masterpiece, their hands, arms, shoulders, their feet to turn the wheel, their whole body into creating a masterpiece. They know every millimeter of the jar or bowl or whatever they are creating. The verses of Psalm 139, which we all read today, suggest just how closely, God, the Master Potter, knows each one of us, His masterpieces. God knows us even better than we know ourselves and there is nowhere we can be that God is not aware.

*Where can I run from your love?  
If I climb to the heavens you are there;  
if I fly to the sunrise or sail beyond the sea,  
still I'd find You there.*

The image of the potter is a very intimate image portraying God's creating work in the world. It implies that God is thinking, planning, and devising that which

he wishes to create. It implies that God's own hand is upon the creation, as the potter's own hand shapes the clay. It implies that God's work is as near and personal and intimate as the unseen force that shapes human tissue into a human child. The potter whom Jeremiah visits, then, is not just a craftsman forming a clay jar. His every thought, his every physical action can be interpreted as an earthly re-enactment of how God labors over his creative work in us to transform us from inert matter into valued and beautiful examples of his creative power.

Two weeks ago, in my reflection on the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter of Jeremiah, I talked about the United Methodist Church's position on abortion. The passage from Jeremiah in chapter 18 brings up another issue that the Church wrestles with. Those advocating for the full inclusion of LGBTQ+ Christians in the church stand on verses 13-16 in Psalm 139. Is our personality and identity formed and shaped by life experiences? Are our sexual preferences chosen at some point in our lives or are our sexual preferences and identities innate and present even before we are born? It might be helpful to review the Church's official position on human sexual orientation and identity.

In paragraph 161, it says,

*We affirm that sexuality is God's good gift to all persons. We call everyone to responsible stewardship of this sacred gift. Although all persons are sexual beings whether or not they are married, sexual relations are affirmed only with the covenant of monogamous, heterosexual marriage.*

*We affirm that all persons are individuals of sacred worth, created in the image of God. ... The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.*

*We affirm that God's grace is available to all. We will seek to live together in Christian community, welcoming, forgiving, and loving one another, as Christ has loved and accepted us. We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons.*

Do we believe that every single human being made exactly as the Lord intended? When combined with Genesis 1:27, "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them;" if all people are made in God's image, then God's image includes lots and lots of people.

For most of us in this century, the idea of God molding us is foreign. We value free will and individual choice. Yet I would argue that every experience we have, every path we follow, every decision we make, molds us, changes us and refashions us. If we are open to the will of God, the discernment of the Holy Spirit and the leadership of Jesus, we are remolded and reformed to resemble more closely the best-self God created us to be.

It's common in church to think about our sins, but many of us may also feel

the weight of regret because of mistakes, bad judgment, shortsightedness, immaturity, thoughtlessness, intentional pranks that have gone awry or other screw-ups — things that hurt someone else in an unintended but permanent way and where there's no chance to undo the harm. And although others tell us that such things are not our fault or that we're only human and are judging ourselves too harshly, we feel what we feel. In fact, it can be a mark of our good character that we are not able to shrug off such regrets.

But what should we do with them?

If only there were something that would allow us to square up for the problems we cause or the sins we commit for which there is nothing we can do to reverse the damage, no way to undo our mistakes or wrongdoings. Can't we just pay for our mistakes and be done with them, so they don't haunt us? We can believe in forgiveness, and we can even *be* forgiven by someone we have hurt, but that may not make our regrets go away.

Our regrets can become instruments of God's grace. God desires and can turn even the worst situations into good. Redemption is always possible.

Here I am waiting once again,  
On my knees, listening and then,  
In a moment a voice so clear,  
Speaks in a whisper  
the words I need to hear:

I know the plans I have for you,  
You're always on my mind.  
And all the thoughts I think toward you  
are lovingly designed ...  
To bring you through  
and give to you  
a future and a hope.  
They're for your peace,  
they're for your good,  
The plans I have for you.

I know the plans I have for you,  
You're always on my mind.  
And all the thoughts I think toward you  
are lovingly designed ...  
To bring you through  
and give to you  
a future and a hope.  
They're for your peace,

they're for your good,  
The plans I have for you.

Oh, there is no one like You!  
Still sometimes I need You to remind me.  
And every time You do,  
you say, "Seek Me.  
You will find Me."

I know the plans I have for you,  
You're always on my mind.  
And all the thoughts I think toward you  
are lovingly designed ...  
To bring you through  
and give to you  
a future and a hope.  
They're for your peace,  
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The plans I have for you.

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Are we willing to trust God with all our flecks and flaws, our foibles and failures, and trust that the Master Potter can make something of beauty out of the beast? Trusting God is to allow ourselves to be centered in the will of God, allowing him to take the raw material we give him and slowly but inexorably fashion it into a vessel of both utility and beauty. Can we have a little faith that God is able and willing to do just that in our lives? It is time to throw ourselves on the wheel; to cast our very selves in the center of the will of God. Yes, if we have a little faith in him, God can be trusted that much -- with our lives, our loved ones, our everything!